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Working from Home vs. In-office post-COVID-19: The End of a Seemingly Never-ending Debate?

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Abstract

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has swiftly and drastically transformed our daily lives, including our perception of working-from-home (WFH) practices. Even in a post-pandemic world, employees have shown an ardent desire to retain the benefits of the novel pandemic-induced remote work experience, which challenges managers to reintegrate them into the conventional office setting. This paper aims to assess the advantages and disadvantages of home and office work environments from the viewpoints of employees and employers to identify the optimal future scenario that maximises the benefits to all parties involved. Although our understanding of the optimal balance between remote and office work is limited, the future of work will involve a hybrid approach, combining remote and in-office work. The transition to such an arrangement demands time, creativity, trust, and various other factors from the parties. It also calls for serious mindset shifts and up/reskilling efforts. The review ends with a consideration of future scenarios and industry implications of adopting hybrid work.

Keywords: COVID-19, remote work, work from home (WFH), hybrid work, up/reskilling

1. Introduction: A Pandemic that Turned our World Upside Down

The advent of COVID-19 plunged the world into unfamiliar territory: among others, COVID-19 reshaped work dynamics, accelerating the adoption of working from home (WFH) and prompting a re-evaluation of traditional workplace norms. Fast forward three years, with easing restrictions and societies striving to return to normalcy, it became clear that the pandemic left a lasting imprint on the fundamental principles of the modern (working) world (Smite et al., 2023). McKinsey's latest survey (2022) reveals that a significant majority of US workers, specifically 87%, have been given the opportunity for remote work and have expressed a strong desire to maintain this arrangement (having 3 days/week WFH on average).

However, miraculous changes do not happen overnight, and no one-size-fits-all solution exists (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro, 2020; Smite et al., 2023). Achieving a smooth transformation-

transition requires substantial mindset and skill enhancements from all parties involved (Franzen-Waschke, 2022a;b). Companies and governments have showcased remarkable flexibility and adaptability in responding to the pandemic, driven by purpose and innovation that can also be applied to reequip the workforce for a better future. As per Jain et al. (2022), the key question is which work-from-home practices will persist in the post-COVID world (remote/hybrid/on-site) and what factors should be considered to maximise their potential. Adding to preliminary works, this brief ‘Food for Thought’ piece initially seeks to encapsulate the present post-COVID situation by examining the pertinent literature while also highlighting pivotal aspects in the journey to address the posed question(s) concerning the future of work.

2. The Future of Working – the Employee of the Future?

COVID-19 brought about a significant shift in people’s preferences and practices when it comes to where, when, and how they work. McKinsey’s extensive report series (2020, 2021, 2022) emphasises that “Now is the time”; organisations must seize the opportunity and break free from outdated practices and systems. As employers worldwide experiment with reintegrating employees into physical office spaces, it has become imperative to reassess established norms and create workplaces that prioritise safety, productivity, and enjoyment. The challenges at hand are exemplified by the following case, provided by Smite et al. (2023:2):

- ☐ *Now it’s time to return to the office. (employer)*
- ☐ *No, we will continue working from home. (employee)*
- ☐ *You must return. (employer)*
- ☐ *OK, then we quit. (employee)*
- ☐ *Please, don’t. You can continue working from home. (employer)*

While telework or telecommuting, often used interchangeably with remote work, emerged in the 1970s, there is no universally agreed-upon definition (Savic, 2020; Wontorczyk & Roznowski, 2022). However, it generally refers to working outside the employer’s physical premises, enabled by the latest information and communication technologies (ICT). It can occur in various locations, such as the home, office, or other places, utilising different technologies and frequencies (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro, 2020; Jain et al., 2022; Wontorczyk & Roznowski, 2022). As a result, a multitude of terms have been used to describe these working modes, contributing to the digital transformation of the workforce, including telecommuting, teleworking, working from home, working remotely, and more (Savic, 2020; Jain et al., 2022). The available evidence strongly supports the enduring nature of remote work as a prevailing trend. As shown in Table 1, WFH has its advantages and disadvantages (Savic, 2020; Jain et al., 2022; Wontorczyk & Roznowski, 2022; Smite et al., 2023):

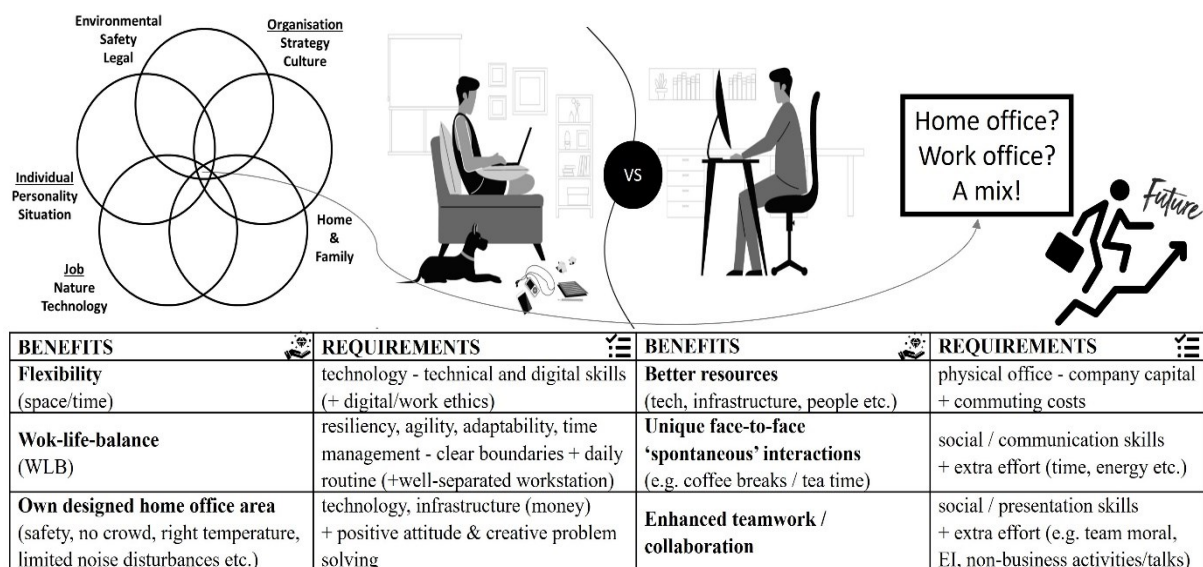
TABLE 1. KEY ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF WFH VS. OFFICE

WFH ADVANTAGES	WFH DISADVANTAGES
Reduced commute time and costs	Limited socialisation → social isolation + feelings of worry & depression
Flexibility in terms of time and space → improved work-life balance (WLB) → minimise work-life conflict → productivity	Blurring boundaries between work and family → constant connectivity → fatigue, tiredness, discomfort, stress, and even physical pain
Control over environmental factors, including indoor environmental quality (IEQ) elements → physical and mental well-being	Huge personal costs associated with WFH ≠ still not the same access to all company resources (e.g., tools, databases, colleagues)
Generally better motivation, increased job satisfaction → enhanced employee productivity	Often issues with teamwork & communication, challenging management approaches, and poor infrastructure → low employee productivity
Enhanced diversity, improved talent retention, reduced absenteeism, and turnover rates, plus minimised physical (office) requirements and costs for employer, as well as the collective environmental costs	Business costs associated with WFH implementation (trainings, allowances etc.) + lower commitment and identification with the organisational culture and values + heightened risk of privacy and security issues

Source: own compilation, based on Savic, 2020; Jain et al., 2022; Wontorczyk & Roznowski, 2022; Smite et al., 2023

As concluded by Jain et al. (2022), the perception of the advantages and disadvantages of working from home is highly contextual: some studies have reported that teleworkers enjoy the flexibility it offers, while others have struggled to maintain a satisfactory work-life balance with ringing doorbells, noisy pets, and interrupting children at the new dining/worktable (WFH autonomy paradox). Remote work conditions differ across companies and employees, so it is crucial to recognise the differences between expectations and the actual challenges presented.

FIGURE 1. KEY FACTORS INFLUENCING THE FUTURE OF (HYBRID) WORK



Source: own compilation, based on Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro, 2020; Tagliaro & Migliore, 2022; Yang et al., 2023

Currently, there is a lack of extensive research on the long-term implications of remote work practices due to the novelty of the COVID-induced phenomenon (Jain et al., 2022). Furthermore, although our current understanding of the opportunities and challenges presented by working in different environments is limited (Wontorczyk & Roznowski, 2022), traditional workplaces must clearly be redesigned to effectively meet the evolving individual priorities and

entice employees to return. According to Appel-Meulenbroek et al. (2022), future work scenarios will likely involve office-oriented activities (communicative work) and home-based tasks (concentration work).

The primary focus now is finding a golden mean, the optimal balance between remote and on-site work, capitalising on the advantages of each, and identifying the necessary requirements for successful multi-location hybrid work (Figure 1). Managers are adapting to this new reality and seeking ways to fulfil employee needs while also aligning with business objectives. Technology undeniably holds a central position in this journey, requiring a “digital mindset” to keep up with the demands of our modern world. This involves qualities such as abundance, growth, agility, comfort with ambiguity, an explorer’s mindset, collaboration, and embracing diversity, which, home office or not, are indispensable traits nevertheless (Savic, 2020:103).

3. Conclusion: New “Office” and 2 Together - 3 Wherever is the future?

Remote work undoubtedly offers advantages for both employers and employees. The benefits, such as cost savings, heightened work engagement, better work-flow, and improved global connectivity make it an attractive choice for many. However, it is important to address potential drawbacks when considering the implementation of the right combination of remote and office work (i.e., hybrid work). These challenges include teamwork issues, blurred work-home boundaries, fatigue, and mental strain, including feelings of alienation, isolation, and worry. The future of work is inevitably hybrid, whether managers (or employees) like it or not.

Organisations prepared for this transition are likely to become “hot spots”, appealing to workers seeking co-COVID “freedom” while also desiring aspects of pre-COVID office life. Striking a balance between these two factors will likely shape the work landscape. However, this projection cannot be universally applied across all industries or countries; certain “physical” activities will still necessitate actual presence, and some underdeveloped regions (and consequently, their industries) might not yet be prepared for such transformative shifts.

What sets this article apart is its novelty as one of the pioneering pieces that scrutinises the aftermath of COVID-19 through a comparative analysis of the pros and cons associated with post-COVID in-office and remote office environments. Despite the topic’s prevalence, the literature review unveiled a gap in research that compares distinct working modes/methods, particularly in dissecting this trend as a dynamic phenomenon entwined with the evolving COVID-19 landscape (including post-COVID ramifications).

Subsequent research is imperative in this domain to assist organisations in embracing the transformative potential of disruptions like COVID-19, as they must navigate new work policies and practices that balance employee and manager expectations for a feel-good office presence (e.g., optional 2-3 WFH/week, team buildings, food trucks, fruit days, office gym passes etc.). This transition also requires cultural and behavioural adjustments and redefining workforce roles and expectations in a technology-driven hybrid work environment.

These changes will have a gradual yet profound impact, including a decline in office visits that will affect the landscape of current business districts and have implications for the real estate, airline, and tourism industries.

Naturally, this review has limitations, mainly due to the absence of primary research. Future research could employ both quantitative and qualitative methods, involving participants from

diverse industries and countries to validate these findings. While this study doesn't offer a conclusive response to future inquiries, it contributes to both literature and work practices, stimulating further research by presenting insightful considerations for the future.

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